

# THE EXPOSITOR

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of his sense-conditioned activities. And, finally, it is the pellucid spring of that joy which rises in the heart when our faith and hope are in God, for it shows us that the things which are to come, and which here we can but dimly discern, are yet not foreign to our nature, but infinitely friendly, at once surpassing imagination and yet also of the very spirit to which we already belong.

A. D. MARTIN.

### *THE CONCEPTION OF A FINITE GOD.*

FOR some years theology has been more than usually familiar with the notion of a finite or growing Deity. It is a thought which has always hovered round the periphery of Christian speculation, making spasmodic efforts to reach the centre; and for some minds the theistic perplexities of the war have probably invested it with fresh attractiveness. Can God rightly be called infinite or omnipotent when such enormities as the present conflict occur in His universe? Easier by far, surely, to believe that He is still grappling with a task too great for Him, though eventually His increasing power and knowledge will master it. He really is working out a history just like ourselves. He is the supreme Spirit, yet an individual inside the scheme of things, and thus far the scheme of things as a whole has partially frustrated His efforts. But it is faith to hold that time will bring equality between task and power, even if the argument seems to involve the conclusion that at each point the task also will have grown and presumably a certain Divine inadequacy will persist.

We must not allow ourselves to be so prejudiced by the obvious dissimilarity between this and the Biblical concep-

tion of God as to suppose that the advocates of Divine finitude are not handling real problems. In point of fact they are working at the crux of all apologetic. It has never ceased to be a question how a perfect God can rule so imperfect a world. This means, what actually is the case, that the problem is by no means so novel as it is often represented ; it also means that instructed thinkers have, at various times, in the endeavour to reconcile the theoretical difficulties of the case with the demands of religious faith, investigated possible solutions which in principle are fairly identical with some of those now placed before us with exaggerated claims to originality. Still, the past never quite repeats itself. A new theology is not merely the re-thinking of an old problem ; it is the emergence of a new problem.

We have first to elucidate the sense of the equivocal adjective " finite " as applied to God. We shall try to indicate the truth denoted by it and next inquire whether this truth vetoes the ascription to God of the epithet " infinite " in the carefully guarded meaning which trained theologians have sought to impose on the word.

A " finite " God, so far as I can see, is a tolerably misleading way of putting the fact that God, at all events for Christian thought, is not identical with the All of things. He is not the Absolute, if by Absolute we mean the Whole of being or the Universe. Unless the immediate certainties of the religious consciousness are to be bowed out of court, we start with the position that man is not a piece of God, but God and selves co-exist within the sphere of reality. Man, in short, is not part of a Whole in which all finites blend as absorbed elements, and if the Whole is the equivalent of all real existence, then the Whole is not God as Christians employ the term. All epigrams, it has been said, bear their falsehood on their face ; and the reported dictum of an eminent British philosopher to the effect that the word

"mind" should never be used in the plural except by way of metaphor is a good instance in point. If this is a typical example of the greater "concreteness" attained by advanced metaphysics, it will be harder than ever to wean intelligent people from common sense.

God, then, for the religious man, is not all-inclusive in the sense that ultimately there is one, and only one, experience. How indeed we should know enough of what "experience" means to predicate it of God unless our own thought and feeling formed a real illustration of it, it is hard to understand. Doubtless in a loose way God may be said to include Nature, since Nature is part of His sphere; yet by very definition Nature is morally insusceptible of God, and it is only by virtue of an incurably spatial fashion of thought that we insist on talking as if God surrounded and pervaded the physical cosmos as the sea pervades and surrounds a sponge. Further, it is not a convincing view that God includes man as a constituent part of Himself in such wise that man and He are equally, or in some at least partially identical way, dependent on each other. According to faith, man is derived from God and dependent on God, but he is not one and the same with God as being only a phase or aspect of the Divine life. Vital religious experiences make any such thoroughgoing identification impossible. One of these is contrition. We cannot without violence overlook the sense of separation from God, of moral distance, apart from which repentance can neither be felt nor interpreted; and the fact that in what the New Testament calls "repentance unto life" this is by no means incongruous with a concomitant awareness of union with the forgiving Father, does not in the least alter the case. In the experience of devout fellowship, moreover, duality as between God and man is implied no less centrally than in penitence itself. To quote Professor Pringle Pattison, "it takes two to love and to be loved,

two to worship and to be worshipped." Reciprocity vanishes when the two terms of relation fall into each other.

Now everything we can truly say about the reality of the individual is so much proof of the "conditionedness" of God. And those thinkers whom the spatial character of the expression does not deter from characterising God as all-inclusive must not object when other people hold that some human experiences—for example, my sinful desires—are outside of God. What more than anything else has led to the equation of God with the Universe, or at any rate with a universal Experience beyond which nothing falls, is the habit of philosophising on the purely logical in abstraction from the moral plane. Not infrequently God is really conceived of as the *Bewusstsein überhaupt*, of which finite spirits are the foci, or even just the logical instances. And, as it has been put, "if God is what we ordinarily mean by a logical Universal, then, of course, it follows that He has no existence except in the particulars." The real question for Theism, consequently, is this: Is there, or is there not, a supreme self-conscious Spirit which is *other than* the finite centres? The phrase "other than," I feel, involves everything which people who speak of a "finite" Deity are trying to say. They are insisting that the moral experience of individuality is not to be sacrificed to an abstract generalisation. Undoubtedly they have adopted a misleading term, and one that creates more errors than it cures; but their drift is clear enough. In short, if the term "Absolute" is to be employed, and if, as apparently is the case, it ought to signify the All of being, it must be used definitely to denote God and the world taken together in their living and essential correlativity. This will ensure justice being done to the human self, with its consciousness at once of dependence and independence. To any one convinced that God is a self it will always be evident that "to suppose a coincidence or literal

identification of several selves, as the doctrine of a Universal Self demands, is even more transparently self-contradictory than that two bodies should occupy the same space ! ” <sup>1</sup>

A further deduction may be drawn from the moral implicates of Theism. The theory of a “finite” God indicates, with whatever confusion, that the Divine action is conditioned by intellectual and moral necessities. Theology has usually understood this not so much as a limitation of the Divine power as rather an explanation of its only possible meaning. It would be difficult to unearth a theologian accustomed to teach that God can literally do anything capable of being stated (I do not say *thought*, for it is an interesting question whether such combinations can really be thought), like making contradictory propositions both true at once, causing the past to be the future, or forcing one man to love another. Trained thinkers have no scruple in (not conceding) but asserting that these are things God cannot do, because they cannot possibly be done. In recent times, theology has been specially keen to ethicise the notion of omnipotence. The power of God is exerted in a moral world and under moral conditions. Suppose a man to pray long and exclusively for fame and money, suppose further his wishes to be granted, shall we say God is non-omnipotent because in *these* circumstances He cannot make the man Christlike ? Or because He cannot forgive the impenitent ? Or because He *so* rules the world that no one becomes noble without sorrow ? Would He be almighty in the proper sense if He could grant the vision of Himself equally to the pure and the impure ? When I want a true instance of omnipotence, as a morally qualified attribute, I survey the power by which He turned the death of Jesus—that sin of sins—to the redemption of the world. Here is real content for the idea re-affirmed by

<sup>1</sup> Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God*, pp. 389-390, n. 3.

our Lord : " With God all things are possible." He who can thus employ the Cross is almighty.

It is not irrelevant to remind ourselves at this point that the chief opponent of the new theory is not, as participants in the controversy occasionally seem to think, traditional theology, but the religious faith of the Bible, and specially of Jesus. So far from questioning Old Testament teaching as to the sublimity and omnipotence of God, Jesus, if possible, laid on it a deeper stress.

But it will be said : You object to finite as a misleading predicate of God ; do you then insist that He is infinite ? On this two remarks may be offered. In the first place, " infinite " is by no means one of those simple, manageable conceptions which we perfectly comprehend ; and even where for want of a better we do use it, we yet may be conscious of various perplexities. There are perplexities in its application to Time no less than to God, as every reader of Kant knows to his cost. An endless series of moments backwards or forwards is just as unthinkable as a series which stops. To handle this adjective in a lighthearted fashion, then, may be a sign of nothing except thoughtlessness. It is not that we stand ready with this predicate in hand, able to feel all round it, and merely in doubt whether or not we shall apply it to God ; we assert it of objects as to which all we may be certain of is that we cannot call them finite. It is in short (so far) a negative rather than a positive conception. We throw out our minds by means of it at an object which outstrips our faculty of thought. But we never understand it as we do the word finite. If I say that God's knowledge is infinite, I do not mean that I can go over His knowledge and point out in detail the qualities in virtue of which it merits the description ; the word is but a shorthand expression of the belief that there is nothing knowable which God does not know. But precisely how much is knowable I

am unable to say, and the difficulties which crowd upon us at this point may be surmised from what the Schoolmen wrote concerning the *scientia media* of God.

The second remark is that in the above-mentioned sense, which denies real limitations other than those imposed by the rational and moral nature of things, some equivalent of "infinite" is predicated of God by every theist. Thus, in a recent article on the theistic implications of Bergson's philosophy,<sup>1</sup> Professor F. H. Foster, while rejecting "infinite" in the old conception of that term," yet concedes that God must be thought of as "immeasurably great," and a few lines thereafter speaks of "the illimitability of His power." If we assume, as we are entitled to do, that Professor Foster has no wish to resuscitate the once prevalent distinction between God in Himself and God as known by us—in short, the doctrine of the relativity of knowledge, which, particularly in its moral applications, brought so much discredit on theology—my own belief is that, provided always we bear in mind the explanations of the Divine omnipotence given in the best theology, there is little difference between Professor Foster's real point and the familiar contention of instructed thinkers. Both are bent on affirming that God is greater than we could ask or think. But when Professor Foster adds that "what we demand is a doctrine of God's greatness large enough to give us ground for a personal and individual trust in Him," he has scarcely chosen a happy form of words to represent the "immeasurable" demand really made by the faith of the single soul, as revealed in the New Testament. There, invariably, all things are in God's power, and it is expressly declared that nothing, not death nor life nor things present nor things to come, can separate us from Him. I cannot think that—metaphysics apart—this vital mood is adequately reproduced in the statement that God need

<sup>1</sup> In the *American Journal of Theology* for April, 1918, pp. 274-299.



not be "infinitely capable in order to meet my individual needs, but only sufficiently." In the future theology which is to pierce beneath the exterior of life to the depths of the soul, we must surely find some better way than this of saying that faith—and reason for that matter—proclaims God's power to be commensurate with the possibilities of all created being. The religious thought of omnipotence at its highest is put finely in the verse of Wesley's hymn :

And whatsoe'er Thou wilt  
Thou dost, O King of kings,  
What Thine unerring wisdom chose,  
Thy power to being brings.

Let us now turn to another aspect of our theme, the conception of the "growing" God. Roughly we may say that this is the Divine finitude as related to time. Here, too, Professor Foster will furnish us with an emphatic formulation, stated with great force and much persuasive skill, of the changes desired in traditional views. Starting from Bergson's idea of the Vital Impulse as "an upward moving force, imperfect in power, uncertain as to methods, struggling toward a great end, itself enlarging as it goes," he faces the issue without concealment by asking, "How can God possibly be conceived of as ever progressing, enlarging, adding new degrees of strength and new attributes?" To this daunting inquiry he answers that, just as an artist becomes a better artist by painting, by creating what is beautiful, so "God, if He creates, also cannot be static, but grows." The thing is put even more unambiguously in a later passage. "If our human strength thus increases, why should it not be so with God's? As He acts why should He not think? And as He progresses in action from the building of a snail to the building of a man why should not His thoughts progress? That is, why should He not think of things He had not thought of? And why should not His purposes progress?"

Why not, therefore, His power ? ”<sup>1</sup> And again : “ God, in doing, in exercising His powers for the good that may thereby be gained, struggles with a task at first too mighty for Him ” ; “ He is Himself ever growing to the growing task which He sets Himself.”

In passing let us not altogether overlook the logical point, minor as it is, that on these lines God will never be perfect. In his vision of the consummation Professor Foster foresees that “ the glory of God thus attained will be light ineffable.” But if God is now unequal to His cosmic task, and if that task grows unendingly, His approach to perfect competence, at best, must be asymptotic. “ Alps on Alps arise.” Perfect, that is, will be an epithet inapplicable to God’s work no less than man’s, and inapplicable not merely now but for ever.

I need hardly say that most people are in hearty agreement with Professor Foster’s preference for a dynamic to a static view of God. By static is meant, presumably, that notion of a rigid immutable Absolute which has often haunted, and still haunts, the realms of philosophy, and which has found epigrammatic expression in the *mot* of a famous metaphysician, “ nothing real ever moves.” To a faith fed by the Bible revelation of “ the living God ” this, of course, can have no meaning. But it is another question whether “ the living God ” can be identified with “ the growing God ” in the sense adumbrated by Professor Foster in the uncompromising words just quoted.

The living God, clearly, is a God possessed of Will, and expressing that will in action. He is not unrelated to the changes occurring in His world ; and if His relation to them

<sup>1</sup> This passage as a whole rests upon the assumption, which cannot be admitted, that we are entitled to call the present phase of the Universe a complete expression of the Divine will. It assumes, in other words, that the existing will of God is all, and always, realised.

is positive, we cannot speak of Him as sheerly unchangeable, since He must change in acting upon a developing universe in order not to change in a deeper, sinister sense. Mechanical uniformity of reaction to an altering situation is, ethically, no better than caprice. God, then, is the God of history—the history of the race, of nations, of individuals. How vital this reality of “change” in God is to the religious mind comes out, for instance, in the central experience of forgiveness. His bestowals on the penitent and on the impenitent are distinct, for moral reasons. Fellowship is reciprocal, and according to our attitude there must be variation on the part of God. This variety of Divine action within human life is one aspect of what is meant by “the living God,” and religion cannot dispense with it.

But a growing God? Is this inferentially present in the great religious truth we have just noted, is it conceivably but another name for the same truth? This must not be assumed. The relation of God to time, as is well known, forms one of the *cruces* of theological philosophy; and it must be said that Professor Foster’s handling of the topic as a whole scarcely reveals an adequate sense of its excessive difficulty and intricacy. From past discussions three possible views have emerged. First, God is unrelated to time, as are say mathematical truths; second, He is within time, just like our own empirical consciousness, enveloped by it and, so to speak, its subject or victim; third, He lives in an eternal present, and reality for Him is one duration which includes past, present, and future, as distinct from that abstract present better known to us which excludes from itself an abstract past and an abstract future. Professor Foster, without debate, takes the second view for granted: from the sentence already quoted, “Why should He not think of things He had not thought of?” it is plain that God is conceived of as within time like ourselves. This will

hardly do. If to apply the conception of growth to God involves His subjection, on a par with men, to time's passage and duration, we shall have to attribute to Him, to select but one example, such an ignorance of the future as will wreck Christian faith in providence from end to end.

The tendency on Professor Foster's part to push to its very limit the analogy between man's experience and God's leads to other consequences we are not enamoured of. Thus, after pointing out in an admirable passage that the painter grows as he paints, creating his own powers as truly as his picture, he adds that it is so with God likewise. But in time the energies of the painter decay and along with his energies, his skill ; shall we also carry this over to the Divine life ? In other words, the human analogy cannot be used *simpliciter* but only, as logicians say, *secundum quid*. Our thought of God must not be too human.

It does not on the whole appear as if advocates of the theory that God develops were prepared to carry through their view to its real conclusion. They seem to follow a tacit distinction between metaphysical and moral attributes. I do not, for instance, observe that Professor Foster anywhere contends that God is now more holy or more loving than formerly. Certain phrases, it is true, may suggest an increase of His wisdom, but not His love or holiness. But if so, then once more there is in this latter respect no important divergence of opinion between Professor Foster and the best theology of the past, for it has always been held—save by an occasional Neoplatonic thinker—that God's love has changed in its expression, its manifestation. It has done so in history, for Christ appeared at one date and not before ; it has done so in the experience of the individual. But in itself, theologians are wont to teach, it has never changed ; and from his silence on the matter we are probably entitled to suppose that Professor Foster agrees.

In this supposition we are encouraged by the definite language he has used on the more general topic. Controverting the proposition that it is the first need of religion that God should be unchangeable, he suggests that for "unchangeability" we should put "reliability." "The need," he continues, "is that in the stresses of life we may be able always to turn to God and find Him invariably helpful, dependable, reliable." Nothing could be better said, but is not the opponent's whole case conceded in the one word "invariably"? After all, God is *unchangeably* helpful. His character is perpetually the same. We cannot question the Divine immutability without finding ourselves obliged to affirm it in a new form. There is truth which cannot be suppressed in the old prophetic word: "I the Lord change not, therefore ye, O house of Israel, are not consumed."

The proposal to define God as change, or progress, or a Becoming would undoubtedly be much more convincing were it not for the fact that Becoming as such implies that which does not become. As we may put it in a paradox which is true all the same, it is only the permanent that changes. Mutable would have no sense for our minds but for the contrast with immutable. It is unnecessary to adduce here all the puzzles that cluster round the question of personal identity or continuity, but at all events it is clear that not even in the case of the human individual does there exist any possibility of bringing all the constitutive facts under the rubric of "becoming." Some identity of content or principle must persist under changing forms of life if the "I" of to-day is to be in any real sense identical with the "I" of twenty years ago. But if change is a category unequal to the data of human experience, because there are data it does not cover, its insufficiency for the higher case is evident.

But this is not to assert the Divine unchangingness, but

rather to imply its opposite ; and thereby we open up a final and most momentous phase of the subject. It was said above that only the permanent changes, and this truth may well suggest, what it exemplifies, the general principle that all our higher thinking, done as it necessarily is from the periphery, not the centre of things, must always end in antinomy. Professor Foster's argument for the finitude and growth of God seems to me to gain its plausibility from the fact that he overlooks the presence of antinomy in religious thought at every turn. No doubt the person who appeals to antinomy is often a very annoying person, who seems merely to be dodging an irresistible argument. And in fact he may be doing this, if he drags in antinomy at the wrong place. But also he may simply be forcing on his neighbour's attention the specific character of religious knowledge. Again, people are often surprised to come upon a theological antinomy ; they insist on treating it as an accident. But, so far from being an accident, it is of the very fibre and substance of religious thought. The surprising thing would be *not* to encounter it at the end of any given avenue leading out from the starting-point of experience.

It remains to apply these generalities to our present theme. We have already considered what really is one form of antinomy in our discussion of the "finite" view of God. It became clear that there are divers human experiences which cannot be transferred to God, or in any way predicated of Him as experiences of His own ; our sinful desires, for example, fall outside His personal life. They are over against Him ; but if anything at all is in any positive sense other than God, He is so far, and in that respect, finite. We may call Him so, in a given relation, if we judge the term a helpful one. And yet writers like Professor Foster, who urge the predicate "finite" upon us, are compelled to add that God is immeasurable and illimitable. So far as I can

see, illimitable is just infinite. Certain things are outside God, yet He has no limits—this is an antinomy.

Similarly when we seek to construe the relation of God to time and its contents.<sup>1</sup> The difficulties of this topic are as old as theism; philosophers and theologians have done their best with them, not altogether successfully. It is of course easy to render the problem simple by wiping out one half of the facts. Time, for instance, may be degraded into something subjective and illusory, as is done by a host of metaphysicians. Whether reality is denied to time, or only so low a degree of reality allowed that it can be ignored in the final reckoning, in either case God is untroubled by any relation to history or the filling of the time-scheme. Time is an intruder; in Shelley's phrase, it "*stains the white radiance of eternity.*" Ideas of the same kind may be found in certain mediæval heretics, who applied the doctrine of Nihilism to the incarnation, protesting that at the coming of Christ nothing really happened which touched the Divine life. God's nature was completely unaffected. But the Church of course would not have it.

On the other hand, relief from antinomy may be sought by declaring boldly that God has a career like any one of us—that, in short, He is growing. The drift of such contentions will always commend itself to religious people in certain moods. To cut the Divine life away from all positive connexion with the stream of events would be to land our-

<sup>1</sup> It is to be hoped that the work of thinkers like Bergson and Croce will lead to history, as a specific kind of reality, being taken more seriously by philosophers. Idealists of every school may find food for thought in a passage such as the following: "There is a reality which stands over against individual action in all its forms, theoretical and practical. This reality is the whole, which is not constituted of the mere sum total of individual actions, but is the resultant or issue of constituent individual actions. In its complete form it stands before the mind as history. There in history stands unalterable fact. It is made and cannot be unmade, but we have made it and it is making us" (Wilton Carr, *The Philosophy of Croce*, pp. 106-107).

selves in utter theological agnosticism. No index of God could then be found in the noblest manifestations of human character. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" would have a purely emotional value. All passionate declarations of the preacher to the effect that in Jesus the Eternal has interposed to bear our load, or that through Christ's experience a new interior sympathy with human need has accrued even to God, become only so much poetic sentiment. Thus by a vital need of religion we seem driven to assert that God has new experiences. If for Him the temporal succession is other than a transient and worthless drama, if He does more than eternally contemplate the succession as a whole, then His will projects into history, and somehow its issues are a gain for Him.

This would be more or less plain sailing, were it not that faith with equal necessity eternalises the Divine life, denying the quality of progress to the character of God; and it is this aspect which, by unreal simplification of the data, Professor Foster ignores. The Christian mind cannot under any circumstances admit that God is more righteous or more compassionate now than at some earlier point, or that He is wiser, or that some day He will be more competent to rule the world than He is now. Pagan faiths no doubt show something of the kind, but Christianity has not even been tempted by the idea. "He who is over all is God, blessed for ever"; "Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail." Professor Foster disclaims the wish to deal with matters "beyond the reach of our observation"; yet, in summing up, he rightly deals with a far distant future, predicting that God will yet surmount all obstacles strewn in His path by the perverted human intellect. Such a prediction, regarding what is far beyond our observation, is the utterance of faith. The same faith, however, deals with the past not less instinctively than with the future, though



neither can be "observed"; and in that past, to its furthest limit, it beholds God as perfect and all-sufficing.

This, it will be said, is to end in contradiction; God in history and God above history form an opposition. It is at all events an antinomy—the synchronous affirmation of two ultimate truths whose unity, or point of convergence, lies beyond our ken. There seems no other way of understanding the two ideas except as distinct and united at the same time; they are mutually dependent; each is in the other, and each presupposes the other. It is just because faith is sure of God's positive relation to history that it cannot away with the notion that this relation should react creatively on His character by way of developing His moral being. It is the "living" God who says, "I the Lord change not." How these two attributes can hold good at once is an insoluble problem; it is but one of a class of problems not accidental but native to genuine thought concerning God.

H. R. MACKINTOSH.

### *THE EARLIEST INTERPRETATIONS OF OUR LORD'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE.*

THE meaning of the Lord's Teaching on Divorce (Matt. v. 31-32, xix. 3-9; Mark x. 2-12; Luke xvi. 18) has been much discussed, and this teaching is likely to be very much, and very variously, insisted upon in the near future.

It is important to see how it was interpreted in Ante-Nicene times. Among the Fathers of this period there are many comments on the above passages, some of considerable length.

On some points there is unanimity. (1) None of them takes the modern view that Mark's account (ch. x.) is primary, Matthew's secondary; they all take Matthew as the main source. Those of us who take the other view ought